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Media Manipulation in Electoral Campaigns: A Qualitative Look at David Duke's Political Career

HENRY C. FONG

As a candidate for the Louisiana State House in 1989, David Ernest Duke certainly did not seem to live up to his image as a world-famous racist.

On the surface, Duke looked every bit the friendly, reasonable boy-next-door: campaigning for a seat in the state legislature as a conservative Republican in a mostly white district, he appealed to voters who agreed with his finely-tuned platform of tax relief, welfare reform, and an end to affirmative action programs. Although Duke's margin of victory was tiny (he beat fellow Republican John Treen by a mere 227 votes in a runoff), it was clear that Duke had aroused a white working- and middle-class insurgency that resembled the populism of the Earl and Huey Long era in its antagonism towards elites and special interests.¹ There was no question that

the candidate rode a wave of Southern resentment, political cynicism, falling living standards and social instability into political office. But there is another question that comes to mind: *How did David Duke manage to secure an elected political office despite his reputation as the most visible racist in the United States?*

Throughout most of his life, Duke had never been one to hide his extremism; on the contrary, he had always deliberately and publicly flaunted his bizarre beliefs and actions. He has worn swastika-emblazoned Nazi uniforms, burned crosses as the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, sold blatantly anti-Semitic literature such as *Hitler Was My Friend*,² and advocated the geographic division of the United States into ethnic homelands à la South Africa.³ Duke once

¹ Lawrence N. Powell, "Read My Liposuction: The Makeover of David Duke," *New Republic*, October 15, 1990.

² Jon Meacham, "Dukedumb: How a Lightweight Louisiana Racist Came to Spook a Nation," *Washington Monthly*, July-August, 1992.

³ James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 150. Also see Tyler Bridges, "Working Together is Louisiana's Best Chance," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 30, 1991. In this article, Duke says that his vision for the ideal structure of a racially mixed state is "like an apartheid, except more complete."

publicly stated that "Jews belong in the ashbin of history."⁴ He was arrested twice for inciting riots and has presented a false military record. And to top off his list of outrageous behavior, Duke posed as a black militant when he penned a book instructing blacks how to "kill whitey," and he also posed as a woman when he wrote a sex manual entitled *Finders Keepers*.⁵

Given his unusual past and racist beliefs, the very fact that Duke was able to mount a serious political campaign for office is surprising. Any perceived misstep on the part of a political actor can spell electoral doom, and it is certainly safe to say that Duke's lifetime record of racism, extremism and demagoguery would have meant political suicide for any other candidate. So the question remains: How is David Duke different from other political aspirants in the American governmental system? How does a racist with a paper trail linking him to Nazis and Klansmen get elected to political office in the United States?

Interestingly, David Duke's exploitation of white Southerners' economic and racial fears are not, in fact, the primary contributor to his emergence as a politician. In fact, there are strong indications that Duke's electoral success actually stemmed from his ability to manipulate the media and moderate his extremist image into one that is more acceptable and appealing to mainstream voters. But even though he abandoned his demagoguery and moderated his extremist image, his unwavering obsession with advancing the cause of white supremacy eventually surfaced and derailed his political career.

The Southern Context

Although it is tempting to simply dismiss Duke as yet another colorful example of Louisiana's populist idiosyncrasy, this explanation can only partially account for his emergence as a factor in American politics. Still, Duke is a complex product of his abilities, his past, his character, and his environment, and it can be argued that Louisiana's unique political setting contributed greatly to Duke's electoral appeal.

Like every other native of the state, David Duke is a product of the social tensions created in the aftermath of southern desegregation. Certainly this post-desegregation era reflected a period of political growth, but at the same time, it also produced a new economic and racial instability in a society that had essentially remained unchanged for almost two centuries. On the one hand, the newly booming urban South progressed quickly: blacks moved back south, small-town southerners migrated to the cities, and the cities themselves swelled with an influx of people, money, and services. But for the South, this rapid change was a dramatic break with the past: as C. Vann Woodward wrote, "The South suddenly entered a period filled with more shocks of discontinuity than any period of its history."⁶ Desegregation—the very catalyst of this era of change—did not quite solve the South's already-fierce racial friction: white southerners feared and resented desegregational policy; to these individuals, the government was giving blacks free license to usurp the whites' long-held social dominance and superior status. Capitalizing

⁴J. Michael Kennedy, "Duke's Talk of Piety May Further Erode Credibility," *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 1991.

⁵Ridgeway 1991, 146. Duke's book inciting blacks to violence against whites was entitled *African Atto* and his dating-and-sex guide was written under the pen name "Dorothy Vanderbilt."

⁶Ferrel Guillory, "David Duke in Southern Context," *The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race*, ed. Douglas D. Rose (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 2.

on these fears, political candidates like Barry Goldwater and George Wallace targeted white voters and called for resistance to what they saw as drastic measures produced by desegregation. White opposition over such policy issues fanned the flames of Southern racism.

Southern economic stress and racial friction also formed an important part of Louisiana's recent history. Pollsters found that white Louisianans had an overwhelming desire to protect the middle class and its values.⁷ As economic stagnation proceeded to set in, voters began to feel that their government no longer cared about middle class needs. The sluggish economy led to a quiet depression that crushed Louisianans' hopes for financial stability and led to even greater frustration and resentment. Racial strife continued as black-white friction in the post-desegregation years produced controversies over jobs, schools, and housing. Large differences in the living conditions and socioeconomic status of blacks and whites set the stage for caustic and prolonged racial conflicts.⁸ Southern socioeconomic instability surrounded David Duke as he grew up in Louisiana, and he later used his knowledge of this particular environment to his political advantage. He knew that by exploiting the fears and hostilities of a large white voting base, he could potentially garner an impressive amount of initial support.

But Duke is more than just another product of Louisiana's special brew of Huey Long populism: while he did manage to tap into the frustration and resentment of Louisiana's white middle class in his various campaigns for office, Duke's emergence as a politician owed its success to more than an

exploitation of economic fears and racial tensions. In fact, during his few years of greatest political achievement (1989 to 1991), Duke's appeal had less to do with his reaction to Louisianans' views than it had to do with voters' reactions to Duke's ever-changing image.

A large part of Duke's success in his campaigns for the state legislature, U.S. Senate, and Louisiana governor was due to his ability to manipulate the media—especially television—and thus publicly transform his image from that of an extremist bigot to that of a moderate, mainstream politician. Duke understood that in order to extend his appeal and influence politically, he had to somehow escape his outrageous past, and he set about to do so in expert fashion: the new David Duke soon sported toned-down rhetoric, coded political jargon and an amazingly “mediagenic”⁹ affinity for television coverage. But upon closer inspection, it is clear that Duke never wavered from his extremist agenda and beliefs. And although he successfully moderated his public image in order to win mainstream approval on a local level, Duke's extremist past and unwavering racism ultimately could not escape the eyes of a larger electorate.

A Personal Profile

David Duke's past is characterized by deliberate and demagogic racism. He has lived his life on the extreme fringes of the racial right, and for most of his life, he has extensively publicized his racist beliefs. And though he already enjoyed the support of fellow hardcore racists who could not care

⁷ Guillory 1992, 6. Guillory presents results from Geoffrey Garin, “How ‘It Can't Happen Here’ Almost Happened in Louisiana: A Study of the David Duke Phenomenon in the 1990 Senate Race,” *Garin-Hart Strategic Research Group of Washington report to the Center for National Policy*, (Washington, D.C., March 1991).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Powell 1990.

less about his prior track record, Duke needed to extend his political appeal to mainstream voters when he ran for the 81st district seat in the state legislature in 1989. In order to accomplish this goal, however, Duke had to first escape his own history.

David Duke was born on July 1, 1950, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the second child of David Hedger Duke and Maxine Crick Duke. His father, a major in the U.S. Army Reserves and an engineer for Shell Oil Company, was constantly engaged in business and military affairs abroad; for the most part, however, the rest of the family remained in Louisiana. At first glance, the Duke household seemed no different than any other middle-class, American family. David Duke later described his youth as "a Beaver Cleaver childhood. We [he and his sister Dotti] rode bicycles, and we played baseball on the front grounds of the Baptist Seminary near my house. I even chipped my front tooth playing football in the street."¹⁰ The elder Dukes held education in high esteem: the children were taught to read at an early age and were required by their father to nurse a book for at least two hours a day. Young David worshipped his father, and soon shared his love of learning. Duke still insists that his father greatly affected his life: "My dad instilled a strong work ethic in me....He told me: no matter what you do, don't ever compromise your principles."¹¹ Duke clearly took his father's words to heart.

But even in childhood, David Duke's seemingly normal, middle class life was not as perfect as it appeared: not only was his father absent much of the time, but his

alcoholic mother and rebellious older sister were constantly at each other's throats. Too young to understand this tense situation and too immature to deal with it directly, David often retreated to his bedroom and threw himself into schoolwork and his hobbies. During this period of isolation and withdrawal, David Duke, age fourteen began to gravitate towards the world of racial politics.

Duke was first exposed to the racial right during his eighth-grade year. In 1964, the issue of integration was a hot topic in the South, and the young David Duke was quite openly sympathetic to the plight of blacks. In fact, he was so outspoken about his stance that his teacher assigned him to write a term paper arguing *against* integration. Eager to approach a new learning exercise, Duke threw himself into the project.

Duke was first exposed to the racial right during his eighth-grade year.

He visited the Citizen's Council, a segregationist group which advocated the use of legal means to fight integration. At the Council's offices, Duke was introduced to segregationist literature which presented a litany of reasons—biological, cultural, historical, and psychological—why integration was doomed to fail. Duke brought many of the Council's books home to read and began an intellectual odyssey into white supremacy: as he read these tracts, he increasingly felt that there was "credible evidence that there were genetic differences between blacks and whites."¹² He soon rejected the liberal arguments he had previously embraced and now concluded that "integration would lower education in America, lead to a great deal of crime...and

¹⁰ Tyler Bridges, *The Rise of David Duke*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 6.

¹¹ Michael Zatarain, *David Duke: Evolution of a Klansman*, (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1990), 68.

¹² Zatarain, 80.

damage our social fabric dramatically.”¹³

It would be naive to believe that this young man’s attraction to racist doctrine was solely driven by his intellectual passions. It has been argued quite convincingly that Duke, “deeply angry and full of rage at his mother’s alcoholism, and disappointed with his father’s frequent absences...[looked] for a scapegoat for his unhappiness and for someone—or something—to provide order in his life.”¹⁴ His search may have led him to gravitate towards the world of Nazism, which offered a clearly-defined doctrine and clear-cut solutions to what he saw as the world’s problems. Soon, the young David Duke was convinced that white supremacy was justified, and in time, he became addicted to racial theory.

Much of Duke’s high school years was spent preaching the tenets of white superiority: he enjoyed debating anyone he could find about the merits of the white race. As a senior, he told his teachers that “if the Nazis had won World War II, Hitler would have taken care of the Communists and Jews in Europe and the blacks afterward in the United States.” He said it was “too bad that Hitler had lost.”¹⁵ Not surprisingly, Duke had become a full-fledged member of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan by the time he graduated from John F. Kennedy High School at the age of seventeen. Duke completely immersed himself in Klan activities; he researched the history of the group and was a regular at the bi-monthly meetings. In the words of a former Klansman, Duke became “a model

member.”¹⁶ The Klan den that Duke joined was led by a New Orleans businessman named Jim Lindsay, whose enormous influence on Duke made him a sort of surrogate father to the young racist.¹⁷ An enigmatic character, Lindsay was mysteriously murdered in 1975; his wife was charged with the crime but was later acquitted. When asked in 1989 if he thought Lindsay’s wife was responsible for her husband’s death, Duke bitterly replied, “Of course she killed him.”¹⁸

“The Nazi of LSU”

In 1968, Duke enrolled at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge, where he gravitated towards yet another racist mentor: a strongly anti-Semitic Catholic priest named Lawrence J. Toups. Toups transformed Duke from a run-of-the-mill southern bigot into a bitter anti-Semite. The college freshman plunged into anti-Semitic literature and joined the National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF), a branch of the National Socialist White People’s Party, which had previously made a name for itself as the American Nazi Party. Duke felt that the Klan lacked the powerful ideology that the Nazis had, and when he read *White Power* by George Lincoln Rockwell—the murdered founder of the American Nazi Party—Duke knew he had found the true foundations of racial politics. Rockwell’s book—which advocates the creation of a “white, Christian nation”—is regarded as the bible of hard-core racists and

¹³ Susan Taylor Martin, “A Racist Alternative: White Supremacist Runs for Office with Little Support or Name Recognition,” *St. Petersburg Times*, April 21, 1988.

¹⁴ Bridges 1994, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Zatarain, 101.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁸ Elizabeth A. Rickey, “The Nazi and the Republicans: An Insider View of the Response of the Louisiana Republican Party to David Duke,” *The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race*, ed. Douglas D. Rose (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 70.

anti-Semites.¹⁹ Duke's interest was aroused: "National Socialism appealed to me," he recalls.²⁰

As a sophomore, Duke began to publicly preach his views at LSU's Free Speech Alley and told students: "I am a National Socialist. You can call me a Nazi if you want to."²¹ He preached that "whites are mentally superior to Negroes"²² and that "the negative influence of Jewish culture" must be stopped.²³ Famous for his vitriolic verbal attacks against minority groups, Duke was dubbed "The Nazi of LSU."²⁴ At school, he went so far as to display his extremism in class: he informed his German professor that *Mein Kampf* was "the greatest piece of literature of the twentieth century" and insisted that Hitler was the "greatest genius who ever lived."²⁵ When lawyer William Kunstler spoke at Tulane University in 1970, Duke picketed the speech. But he did not stop there: he went dressed in a Nazi uniform, brandishing a red swastika armband and carrying a sign which read "Kunstler is a Communist Jew" and "Gas the Chicago Seven."²⁶

Duke's father sharply rebuked his son for the Kunstler incident, and Duke obediently left the NSLF and told his friends he could no longer support Nazism. But a few short months later, he started a new student group called the White Youth Alliance (WYA),

which essentially copied the NSLF dogma. A WYA pamphlet which spelled out the group's goals and activities (and which featured a photograph of Duke holding a copy of *White Power*) was filled with passages copied verbatim from NSLF publications.²⁷ The WYA newsletter, *The Racialist* advertised various books and tapes for sale, including *Our Nordic Race*, *The Zionists Behind Communism*, and the ever-popular *Mein Kampf*.²⁸ Duke's group did little except protest several speeches by civil rights advocates, and the WYA effectively dissolved when Duke accepted a short-term job teaching English to military officers in Laos.²⁹

With the money he earned in Laos, Duke traveled to different countries, including India. His trip was more than just a sightseeing adventure—it profoundly affected him and fueled his racist beliefs. Upon arriving in various Indian cities, Duke became astonished by what he saw; he later wrote that the "backwardness of the people,...the dirt and trash,...it was like looking at a nightmare,....The historical reality of race slowly began to crowd in on me."³⁰ Duke was convinced that India's poverty and decay was due to the decline in racial purity of the white Aryans who once ruled India:

I wonder if, a few hundred years from

¹⁹ Lance Hill, "Nazi Race Doctrine in the Political Thought of David Duke," *The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race*, ed. Douglas D. Rose (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 98. It is possible that Duke's idol George Lincoln Rockwell—who had political aspirations of his own—inspired Duke to run for public office.

²⁰ Zatarain, 116.

²¹ William V. Moore, "David Duke: The White Knight," *The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race*, ed. Douglas D. Rose (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 43.

²² Zatarain, 128.

²³ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁴ One of Duke's fellow LSU students was James Carville, who says he "used to show people around: there's the stadium, there's the library, there's the campanile, there's our fascist." See Garry Wills, "Clinton's Hell-Raiser," *New Yorker*, October 12, 1992.

²⁵ Moore, 44.

²⁶ Tony Freemantle, "Duke Advances One-Issue Platform—The White Race," *Houston Chronicle*, January 19, 1992.

²⁷ Moore, 45.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹ Zatarain, 148.

³⁰ David Maraniss, "Duke's Obsession: White Supremacy with a Plan," *Washington Post*, November 10, 1991. India was first settled by Aryans, a white-skinned warlike nomadic tribe which was glorified by the Third Reich.

now, some half-black ancestor of mine will be sitting in the ruins of our civilization brushing away the flies. Every day, our nation grows a little darker from massive nonwhite immigration, high nonwhite birthrates and increasing racial miscegenation, and with each passing day we see the quality of our lives decline a little bit more.³¹

Upon his return to the United States, Duke promptly established a new white supremacist group called the National Party. This group's stated agenda was not only to protest, but to actually affect change in government policy; Duke explained that the National Party would contest elections and advance its agenda through political means. Duke intended for this group to be "based on Klan principles [and] Klan symbols," and once again, he published a newsletter for the group. Although the party maintained a fairly low profile, Duke's advice for his followers clearly mirrored his later campaign strategy: the party's ideology had to be immutable while its tactics were flexible.³² Early on, Duke showed an understanding of the pragmatic side of politics and the need to adjust his techniques at times in order to extend his support base.

Grand Wizard

After marrying longtime supporter Chloe Hardin in 1972, Duke reentered LSU and returned to the Ku Klux Klan. His devotion to the organization soon led to positions as the Louisiana grand dragon and as the national information director. Staying true to the goals he set for the National party, Duke altered

the focus of his Louisiana Klan when he became grand wizard—he decided to make the organization youth-oriented, broad-based, and politically pragmatic. He took advantage of racial tensions in Louisiana by establishing a Klan Youth Corps for white teenagers; he based his recruiting efforts in high schools and was enormously successful. By the late 1970's, Duke had instituted Klan Youth chapters throughout the country.³³ He broke Klan tradition and offered memberships to women, Catholics, and soldiers in the military. Klan membership skyrocketed.³⁴

Duke attempted to make the Klan a viable political force by making it more respectable, and his efforts made him one of the foremost racists in the country. He protected his organization through legal means, insisting, for example, that Klan demonstrations and sales of anti-Semitic literature were rightful exercises of free speech. Although Duke believed that the Jews who he felt controlled mainstream American media would never give him fair treatment on television, he also understood that in order to successfully promote the Klan, media attention was vital. And Duke soon learned how easily he could manipulate the media: not only did he discover that the Ku Klux Klan's very name was a magnet for journalists, Duke also found that many unprepared reporters were easily thrown off when he "effortlessly parried their hostile questions and articulately outlined" his views.³⁵ Youthful, articulate, and handsome, Duke represented a new image of the Klan. His appearances on national talk shows such as *Today* and his college lecture series attracted both free publicity and new recruits eager to join the cause. Klan membership more than doubled during Duke's reign as the organization's spokesman and

³¹ Kennedy 1991.

³² Moore, 46.

³³ Bridges 1994, 45.

³⁴ Moore, 48.

³⁵ Bridges 1994, 45.

poster boy.³⁶ Even his opponents admired his strategy: Danny Welch, director of the Klanwatch Project, said that Duke “used tactics that had never been used before—throw away the robe, put on a three-piece suit, cut your hair, and get yourself on T.V.”³⁷

But by 1980, Duke felt that his political agenda could not be advanced any further through the Klan. He felt that “there was no way I was going to change that image...of the typical Klansman—the ignorant, toothless, gun-toting hater talking about race war.”³⁸ The Klan’s image was too negative and its history too violent to achieve the political status Duke wanted it to, so he left the organization to form a new one. He named his new group the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP) so that its “name and clear purpose made it impossible for minority racists to condemn us without exposing their hypocrisy.” The NAAWP was meant to be “primarily a white rights lobby organization, a racial movement, mainly middle class.”³⁹ And again, Duke published a subsidiary newsletter—the *NAAWP News*. The newsletter contained a variety of anti-black and anti-Semitic articles and advertisements. While this new group lacked the power and fame the Klan enjoyed, Duke could now claim that he had distanced himself from previous associations and thus lure a larger part of the mainstream electorate which had been reluctant to support a Klansman.

Though it is quite clear that David Duke’s past is filled with racist appeals and extremist positions, he still won public office in 1989. Even after acknowledging parts of his extremist past, Duke was able to manipulate

his public image and present himself as a new, improved man ashamed of his “youthful indiscretions.”⁴⁰

Makeover

By any measurable account, David Duke’s political career was barely significant at all to the world of American politics. As a mainstream candidate, Duke won only one office—that of a Louisiana state representative; he was but a tiny fish in the political sea. But Duke’s public record as a white supremacist made his relative successes nothing short of remarkable: he drew more than 60 percent of the white vote in his unsuccessful 1990 run for the U.S. Senate, and in his gubernatorial campaign the following year, Duke garnered enough support to oust incumbent Buddy Roemer before losing against Edwin Edwards in a runoff election. Duke clearly could not have registered such an impressive showing without toning down his extremist image: after all, he knew that a serious candidacy on his part would entail appealing to the mainstream electorate as well as maintaining his established racist core of support. By the time he ran for the state legislature in 1989, Duke had begun to moderate his public persona.

From the onset of his 1989 campaign for the state legislature to his withdrawal from the 1992 presidential race, Duke masked his extremism with a mainstream, conservative image. The new David Duke was a carefully sanitized version of his former self; a more subtle appeal to disaffected, moderate

³⁶ Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, *Hate Groups in America: A Record of Bigotry and Violence*, (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, 1988), 4. The ADL estimates that under Duke’s reign as the group’s national media director, total Klan membership shot from 5,000 in 1973 to 10,500 in 1979.

³⁷ Peter Applebome, “Louisiana Showdown: Duke vs. Edwards.” *New York Times*, November 10, 1991.

³⁸ Maraniss 1991.

³⁹ Moore 1992, 49.

⁴⁰ Maraniss 1991.

conservative voters replaced the blatant racist dogma in Duke's speeches. Extending his image as an articulate, charming media darling, he used his public appearances to present a clean David Duke who disavowed his extremist past and dismissed his racist activities as "youthful indiscretions." Smooth and telegenic, Duke's moderate-sounding platform against affirmative action, immigration, and welfare cheats attracted a sizable audience. He exploited these legitimate political issues and thus broadened his constituency among better-educated middle-class voters without alienating his racist base. But although this new and improved Duke refrained (usually) from outright racist appeals, his mainstream image was only a deceptive façade.

Duke began his image transformation by undergoing cosmetic surgery in order to enhance his telegenic looks. He dyed his hair and shaved off his "Hitler" mustache. Duke had liposuction on his lips, a nose job, a chin implant, a skin tuck, a chemical peel, and had smile-wrinkles added around his eyes.⁴¹ And following the advice of a friend, he discarded his "K-mart suits" in exchange for more fashionable tailoring.⁴² As Duke wrote in *Finders Keepers*, the sex manual he wrote under the pseudonym of Dorothy Vanderbilt, "changing the outside of a person for the better can go a long way towards changing the inside."⁴³ But evidently, Duke's transformation was only skin-deep: he did not shed his racist ideology as easily as he rid himself of his old face and old clothes.

On the surface, however, he certainly

appeared different, and this new image clearly helped him garner more support than he would have received otherwise. As a newly "mainstreamed" candidate, Duke delivered his political views in a friendly, low-key manner quite removed from the caustic style he employed as a college neo-Nazi. Instead of saying outright that "whites are the master race"⁴⁴ as he once did, Duke now spoke only of his "love for Western civilization."⁴⁵ Duke knew that he could count on his charisma and good looks to further his image as an attractive candidate: "I can't help it if I'm the Robert Redford of the right."⁴⁶ And although Duke's campaign platform was extremely conservative, it was certainly a far cry from his crude theorizing about how emergency medical blood supplies should be racially segregated or how America's dental problems stem from intermarriage between "different European subraces."⁴⁷ Duke explained that he had matured since his college days, and that he had "been too intolerant....I regret some of the things I have said."⁴⁸ Even Duke's newsletter, the *NAACP News*, toned down its message about Aryan superiority.

But despite his attempts to protect his new image, the essential Duke was often revealed through careful observation and research into his past. For example, even though he left the Ku Klux Klan in 1980, Duke never publicly renounced the Klan and has long been tied to the organization as well as with other racist groups.⁴⁹ He often referred to his Klan past during his campaigns because he felt it would show that he "meant business"⁵⁰ and

⁴¹ Bill Hewitt and Ron Ridenhour, "An Ex-Klansman Cools His Image," *People*, November 18, 1991. Also see Powell 1990.

⁴² Bridges 1994, 168.

⁴³ Powell 1990.

⁴⁴ Zatarain 1990, 123.

⁴⁵ Applebome 1991.

⁴⁶ Martin 1988.

⁴⁷ Powell 1990.

⁴⁸ Bill Nichols, "David Duke's Record at Odds with Public Persona," *USA Today*, November 8, 1991.

when questioned about his fondness for Klan doctrine, Duke replied, "people always say it's the same old Klan package. Well, it's true from the standpoint of myself. My ideology has not fundamentally changed."⁵¹

It seems even clearer that Duke still held onto his racist views when his recent statements are examined. After his 1989 legislative victory, he told Tulane University student Abby Kaplan in a taped interview that he agreed with Hitler that America should not have fought in World War II, and went on to say that blacks were genetically predisposed to criminal behavior.⁵² Duke also stated that "there is only one country [now] that is all-white, and that's Iceland. And Iceland is not enough."⁵³

During his gubernatorial campaign in 1991, Duke argued for "equal rights for all races"⁵⁴ and denounced racism; however, evidence emerged which exposed the candidate's empty rhetoric. Duke said that he abhorred Nazism: "I am opposed to Nazism, any totalitarianism, of any kind." But in a taped 1989 interview, Duke advised a neo-Nazi to follow in his footsteps and keep his Nazi loyalties "under wraps....If they can call you a Nazi and make it stick, it's going to hurt the ability of people to open their

minds to what you're saying." Duke went on to say that he would never admit to his Nazi beliefs in public "for practical reasons. I wheedle out of it, because I'm a pragmatist."⁵⁵ But despite his self-proclaimed pragmatism, he expressed his Nazi-loyalties well into the 1980s. Duke told others that the Holocaust was "a myth perpetrated on Christians by Jews," and he annually toasted Hitler's birthday with "a few beers and...a few Sieg Heils."⁵⁶ Even now, Duke feels that history has slighted Hitler: "When a man like Hitler does a hundred great things and then kills somebody, everyone remembers the killing and forgets what great things the man did."⁵⁷

As a gubernatorial candidate in 1991, Duke told reporters that a major source of his decision to reject racism was his "relationship with Christ....I believe that through Christ, all of us become more tolerant."⁵⁸ Duke asserted that he was a full-time member of the Evangelical Baptist Church, but there was one slight problem: there is no such church. When confronted with this information, the candidate then backpedaled and said he belonged to a private evangelical study group, but he named as his minister a retiree of 14 years.⁵⁹ According to research conducted by the Louisiana Coalition

⁴⁹ Ridgeway 1991, 117. Duke has acknowledged working with racist organizations; he told *Newsweek* in 1975 that "we work with [them] wherever we can."

⁵⁰ Powell 1990. According to Tyler Bridges (in personal interview, April 26, 1994), Duke acknowledged his Klan past in speeches in order to show his racist supporters that he still represented their interests. Interestingly, Duke did not bring up his Nazi affiliations, fearing that they would hurt his campaign.

⁵¹ Applebome, 1991.

⁵² Freemantle 1992. Duke said in January 1992 that "there are certain behavioral tendencies, and I think that blacks generally, in terms of our society, have more of a tendency to act in anti-social ways."

⁵³ Nichols 1991.

⁵⁴ Ridgeway 1991, 117.

⁵⁵ Tyler Bridges, "Duke the 'Nazi'," *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 17, 1991.

⁵⁶ Bridges 1991.

⁵⁷ David Duke, in personal interview, April 13, 1994. Duke could only be contacted via his call-in radio talk show, so my questions were asked on the air. While I was on hold, I had the opportunity to listen in on other callers' questions. The call immediately preceding mine was that of a Louisiana farmer's; he informed Duke and his listeners that the Holocaust did in fact happen, but that Hitler had ordered it stopped. Why wasn't Hitler's order followed? "Red tape in the Nazi bureaucracy," answered the farmer.

⁵⁸ Nichols 1991.

⁵⁹ Kennedy 1991. The retired minister that Duke named also happened to be his campaign photographer and pilot.

Against Racism and Nazism (LCARN), Duke had called himself an atheist for years, and as recently as 1987 he attended the Identity Church which teaches that blacks are subhuman and Jews are the offspring of Satan.⁶⁰

Still, Duke maintained that he was not a racist and that he was simply an advocate of "true equal rights." This statement became suspect after it was reported that after Duke's victorious campaign in 1989, he attended a convention in Chicago held by the new Populist Party—a group formed by neo-Nazi skinheads and Klansmen—and was photographed shaking hands with Art Jones, an infamous neo-Nazi. Although Duke had earlier declared that "my victory was a victory for true equal rights and greater understanding and *not intolerance and discrimination*" (emphasis added), he had a different message for the Populists: "my victory was a victory for the white majority movement in this country."⁶¹

Code Words

Duke's relative political successes have capitalized on his uncanny ability to code his racist beliefs with mainstream vocabulary. He was able to develop a new language for old obsessions: Duke used images of "Christian unity" and "the invading welfare underclass" to convey his extremist messages.⁶² His

campaign speeches are filled with instances of such doublespeak, in which he gives new labels to racist terms.

By exploiting legitimately controversial political issues, Duke attracted supporters who shared his stance on those issues. Many voters had their own reasons for disliking enforced busing, affirmative action, or welfare abuse, and they sympathized with Duke because he felt the same way about these issues. They did not know or did not care that the candidate's stance on these issues was determined by his racist beliefs. Of course, Duke could explain his political views in a manner acceptable to many mainstream voters; when asked why he is anti-affirmative action, he replied that it was a form of

*He continued to use
the press as a free
medium for gather-
ing support.*

"racial preference" that he could not abide.⁶³ He knew how to present his words in ways palatable to the general public: "Never refer to racial superiority or inferiority, only talk about racial differences."⁶⁴ At a 1991 campaign rally, Duke said that "the time has come in this country to stand up for us, to stand up for our heritage and our way of life. Our Christian values are under attack."⁶⁵ Time and time again, Duke sought to remind voters that he was not a racist, but instead a savior for the "besieged" white culture; in speeches, he reminded his "Western Christian" compatriots to be wary of the "rising welfare underclass."⁶⁶ However, it is difficult to ignore the fact that his term

⁶⁰ Nichols 1991. The Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism is a PAC created specifically to counter Duke's political aims. According to Tyler Bridges (in personal interview, April 26, 1994), LCARN is "on hold until Duke or someone with his beliefs makes a move towards political office."

⁶¹ Rickey, 63-64.

⁶² Applebome 1991.

⁶³ Robin Toner, "Duke Takes His Anger Into 1992 Race," *New York Times*, December 5, 1991.

⁶⁴ Jason Berry, "Louisiana Hateride: The Politics of David Duke," *The Nation*, December 9, 1991.

⁶⁵ Applebome 1991.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

“Western Christian” excludes blacks, Jews, and all other non-white ethnic groups. It is equally obvious that the “underclass” which he denounces represents those minorities who have been stereotyped as extremely prolific—but impoverished—“welfare queens”: blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. He distastefully refers to this “underclass” as a “growing parasite.”⁶⁷ Duke’s identification of minorities as those who suck the money and life out of white America is coded in his campaign rhetoric: he has said that the “underclass leeches off the productive taxpayer in order to feed its drug habit and produce more illegitimate babies.”⁶⁸ Duke told doctoral candidate Evelyn Rich that welfare was “evil...because welfare recipients [have] nothing to do but breed.”⁶⁹ His use of racial code makes it clear that his extremist beliefs had not wavered. As Louisiana State Senator Ben Bagert said, “[Duke] doesn’t talk about blacks anymore. It’s just a wink and a nod; everyone knows what he means.”⁷⁰

Voters who were turned off by Duke’s blatantly extremist past tuned in to the more subtly racist campaign rhetoric which tapped into their frustrations and resentments. These voters could support Duke’s seemingly kinder, gentler message without worrying about being labeled an outright bigot. After Duke aired a half-hour television ad in which he offered voters a compelling image of himself and his campaign platform during his senatorial bid, Louisiana Republican Party Chairman Billy Nungesser said “If I didn’t know who David Duke was, I’d vote for him. That’s as good an ad as I’ve ever seen.”⁷¹ In

his ad, Duke had urged voters to support him as he took advantage of frustrated whites; he coded his racist doctrine in vague—yet reasonable-sounding—terms. He told his viewers:

For too long, we’ve been afraid to stand up to reverse discrimination, to liberal social engineering, to attempts to belittle and reduce the role of Western Christian culture in American life....Let’s insist on equal rights for all. Let’s defend and preserve the values and principles that have enabled this nation to endure and thrive. We’ve been silent too long.⁷²

Duke was able to successfully use deceptive rhetorical coding in order to mask his extremist beliefs and thus capture a substantial number of mainstream votes while retaining a foothold with his racist core of support. Even while he tried to gain more mainstream followers, he stuck by his extremist—albeit hidden—beliefs.

Duke TV

A large measure of Duke’s political success was also derived from his manipulation of the broadcast news media. Ever since his days as a telegenic Klansman, Duke had actively sought publicity for his views; as a candidate, he continued to make use of the press as a free medium for gathering support. Duke built up much of his support from news coverage by using his notoriety

⁶⁷ Howard Kurtz, “New Orleans Paper Plays a Central Role in Contest,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 1991.

⁶⁸ Toner 1991.

⁶⁹ Bridges 1994, 178.

⁷⁰ Bridges 1991.

⁷¹ Bridges 1994, 185.

⁷² *Ibid.* Duke’s 30-minute television ad also included a toll 900 number which he urged voters to call. Each call cost ten dollars; eight of those dollars went to Duke’s campaign. In one month, these phone calls raised \$88,000 for him. The candidate expected another \$200,000 before election day, but South Central Bell cited a corporate policy prohibiting customers from using 900 numbers to help political campaigns and subsequently disconnected Duke’s phone-contribution service.

to gain attention, and then by making use of the structural characteristics of television to get the best coverage possible. In order to enter and remain in the political consciousness of common voters, Duke had to receive constant coverage from their main source of information: television news. And Duke himself certainly knew how to get media attention: as he himself said, "you have to be so radical that you break [into] press coverage. Once you become radical, or have a radical reputation, that makes you interesting. Extremism gets you into the arena."⁷³

In his campaigns, Duke kept himself sufficiently controversial to encourage continuing news coverage, but also stuck closely enough to his clean image in order to keep his mainstream support. Thus, both his racist ideology and political pragmatism made him retain as much of his extremism as possible, while combining it as best he could with a television persona acceptable to the voting mainstream. A master of media manipulation, Duke achieved this by exploiting inherent weaknesses in television coverage.

Duke recognized that television reporters usually are not experts in the stories they report, and he took advantage of this fact. Duke's well-rehearsed sound bites played well on television, which featured him nearly every night on the local news. The candidate was prepared for questions about his Klan past, and reporters who asked these questions were given canned answers and a sound bite on a "hot-button issue."⁷⁴ Since most TV reporters rely on quick research and basic journalism to get things done as they go from story to story, they are not likely to have the

knowledge and depth in their coverage that most print journalists do. Without the resources necessary to do additional research, news reporters found themselves unable to dig beneath Duke's composed veneer. Furthermore, there simply was not enough available air time to appropriate to coverage of the candidate and his past. Time constraints limit each news segment to only a few sentences; when Duke's campaigns were covered, his lengthy sound bites took up much of the air time devoted to covering his candidacy. Also, television stations rarely keep archives of news stories, and are thus unlikely to have a collective memory about personalities such as Duke, making it all the more difficult to unearth facts about his racist beliefs and present them in ways which continue in the consciousness of broadcast coverage. This "television amnesia" is shared by those who watch television news; studies have shown that audiences are not likely to remember much of what they saw on TV after a day or two.⁷⁵

Moreover, television—as a visual medium—was highly attracted to Duke's carefully cultivated, smiling, friendly image. Duke's carefully crafted self-image (along with his warm, reasonable voice) reinforced the crucial nice-guy appeal that accompanied his message. When critics attacked him with evidence of his Nazism or quotes from his past, Duke's boyishly handsome profile lent credence to his claims of innocence: "Why are they attacking me? Anyone can see I am a reasonable, good fellow."⁷⁶ The candidate played his role as a martyr quite effectively. He frequently used public attacks on him to emphasize his role as the underdog outsider: "the establishment attacks me because they

⁷³ Freemantle 1992.

⁷⁴ Bridges 1994, 151.

⁷⁵ Gary Esolen, "More Than a Pretty Face: David Duke's Use of Television as a Political Tool," *The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race*, ed. Douglas D. Rose (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 141.

⁷⁶ Esolen, 147.

know I have the courage to stand up for the little guy."⁷⁷ When a local news reporter angrily confronted Duke with the candidate's own statement that "horses contributed more to the building of American civilization than blacks," Duke contorted his face and took on the hurt air of a victim under attack: "I don't think you're really being fair to me, sir....You're putting me down." The television station was flooded with angry calls the next morning, criticizing the reporter's tactics.⁷⁸ Similarly, interviewer Sam Donaldson came across as a bully on national television when he tried to probe into Duke's past. On a November 1989 appearance on *Prime Time Live*, host Donaldson aggressively questioned the candidate about his racial beliefs. Duke's attempts to shift the topic of conversation to his more moderate-sounding campaign platform were met with Donaldson's repeated interruptions. Once again cool under pressure, Duke calmly told his interviewer that he was "really not being fair."⁷⁹ Many viewers saw the host as a bully and the candidate as the victim. Donaldson and many other experienced journalists did not take into account the fact that Duke had had a lifetime of practice facing off against hostile interviewers' questions about his past. By this point, the candidate was virtually an expert in the craft of televised image manipulation. Television's dependence on high ratings also helped Duke shape his own TV image. News programs and talk shows actively sought the candidate as an interview subject because of his potential for controversy. Duke exploited this demand for him, and made sure that his critics would not have a forum on the programs in which he

appeared. The candidate often agreed to make personal appearances on news programs and talk shows only after he was guaranteed that his critics and opponents would not be present at the tapings; furthermore, he refused to appear on television shows unless producers agreed not to bring up his Nazi or Klan past. Hungry for increased ratings, network honchos frequently relinquished much control in return for Duke's participation. Producers were more than willing to defer to the candidate's wishes. ABC's *Nightline* wanted Duke to appear so badly that its producers accepted the controversial candidate's conditions that he not appear with guests he did not approve of.⁸⁰ And before allowing himself to be interviewed on *Donahue*, Duke specifically required that no footage be shown of him in Klan robes and that there be no mention whatsoever of quotes from his past which might conflict with his newer, more moderate positions.⁸¹ Duke was constantly sought after as an interview subject on a great number of national television programs; meanwhile, each of his appearances on shows like *Good Morning America*, *Nightwatch*, *Larry King Live*, and *Crossfire* inevitably prompted thousands of viewers to contribute to the candidate's campaign coffers. Duke almost always performed extremely well on television. Not only was he an old hand at evading hostile questions, many interviewers were frequently unprepared; as broadcast journalists, they often did not have the time or resources necessary to completely familiarize themselves with the candidate's past activities and his extremist notions. Therefore, they often allowed Duke to skirt the issues surrounding his racist past and

⁷⁷ Tyler Bridges, "Rubber Duke?: As Long as the GOP Keeps Ignoring Him, He'll Keep Bouncing Back," *Washington Post*, December 8, 1991.

⁷⁸ Berry 1991.

⁷⁹ Bridges 1994, 168.

⁸⁰ Bridges 1991.

⁸¹ Peter Applebome, "On the Past and Future of a Politician: Was Duke Made for TV, or Made by It?" *New York Times*, November 20, 1991.

failed to rebut him with examples of his recent extremism.

The local print media, too, had a difficult time dealing with Duke, but for different reasons. The only daily newspaper in New Orleans, the *Times-Picayune*, made an early editorial decision in 1989 to leave coverage of Duke's campaign for the state legislature to the bureau reporters assigned to the candidate's district.⁸² That decision precluded any in-depth investigation into Duke's past, which would have required a free reporter with time enough to conduct a massive amount of research; a suburban bureau simply could not handle the task. Then, after *Times-Picayune* reporter Tyler Bridges spent close to two years digging up Duke's skeletons, the newspaper could not decide whether or not to run Bridges' pieces, fearing a violation of the journalistic aim for objectivity. Ultimately, the *Times-Picayune* resolved to keep Duke from the governor's mansion and launched a series of election-week editorials urging voters to reject him at the polls.⁸³

Limited Dukedom

Duke was relatively successful in his local efforts to mask his extremism with a moderated image, coded messages, and television manipulation. After all, he won a seat in the Louisiana State House, and had better-than-expected showings in his bids for U.S. Senate in 1990 and the governorship in 1991. But Duke could only advance so far politically because of the stigma attached to his racist past: he has lost every political race he entered after 1989, including his dismal

bid for the presidency in 1992. His campaign for the White House was widely reported to have lost steam because ultraconservative pundit-turned-candidate Pat Buchanan absorbed most of Duke's issues and supporters; indeed, Buchanan often sounded like a David Duke clone. The two candidates' quotes were often indistinguishable.⁸⁴ Duke's hardcore racist backers stuck with him, but many of those who had only supported his conservative political views gravitated to Buchanan because he did not have the stigma of a notorious past. Strong evidence of Duke's racism and extremism had been revealed by a number of his opponents, which considerably weakened his post-1989 campaigns. It was discovered that Duke had sold Nazi literature from his legislative offices in Metairie⁸⁵ and that his closest friends and advisors were Klansmen and Nazi sympathizers. Duke's military record was found to be a sham, and clear instances of racism in his interviews and statements returned to haunt him. Certainly, the national press corps in 1992 held Duke under more scrutiny than the local media did in previous years. Duke was exposed, and with a national audience glaring at him, he had nowhere to hide. He could only achieve so much politically on the strength of his pragmatism and remarkable image-bending skills.

When It Rains, It Pours

Duke's political career has taken a sharp nosedive since his ill-fated run for the presidency in 1992. Once described as a "self-employed career fundraiser,"⁸⁶ Duke has been

⁸² Esolen, 142.

⁸³ Jim Amoss, "The David Duke Story Pushed One Newspaper Into a 'Battle for the Soul of the Electorate'," *Bulletin for the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE)*, March 1992.

⁸⁴ Bridges 1994, 245. Try to identify whether Duke or Buchanan uttered this statement: "Does this First World nation want to become a Third World country? Because that is our destiny if we do not build a sea wall against the waves of immigration rolling over our shores." (Answer: Buchanan)

⁸⁵ Rickey, 66.

⁸⁶ Berry 1991.

unable to find a steady source of income: his once highly-sought-after autobiography was turned down by every publisher he approached, and he lost a job selling insurance. Heavily in debt, Duke found no takers for a college lecture tour, and was sued by the state for accepting improper campaign contributions. In October of 1992, Duke was spotted among displays of plumbing fixtures and car alarms at a home show as he peddled baseball caps, T-shirts, and buttons left over from his failed presidential campaign. One observer noted, "he looked sort of pitiful. No one was paying attention to him."⁸⁷ In April of 1993, he applied for a position as a radio talk-show host and got the job; the station manager, an orthodox Jew, felt that if he did not hire Duke, "they'll say it's the Zionist media trying to block [him] out."⁸⁸ Duke's radio program, which offered racially-tinged right-wing insight into current political issues, failed to post spectacular ratings and was soon canceled. Desperate to stay in the public eye, Duke organized a group of investors and paid the station \$300 an hour to allow him to stay on the air (until he voluntarily stopped broadcasting last summer).⁸⁹ Occasionally, the extremist still let down his guard and allowed his beliefs to be seen; he once said that the existence of different skin colors was compelling evidence that God had intended for different races to be segregated.⁹⁰

Duke's political career perfectly illustrates the limited political viability of extremist movements in American government. As a campaigner, Duke was a

shrewd and effective competitor, but his outrageous beliefs and personal history emerged publicly and exposed him as a world-class demagogue and racist. The ability to manipulate the media is not one that is unique to Duke; surely it is conceivable that all politicians use, to some degree, a knowledge of the workings of broadcast and print journalism for their own advantage. But even in an era where sound bites, wire releases and leaks to the press are often used to influence politics, the manipulation of media can only be taken so far. Duke used all his cleverness and experience to take advantage of the inherent qualities of the media in order to extend his base of political support, but it eventually became all too obvious that even his expertise in image modification could not hide his underlying extremism.

To the American public, the name "David Duke" has now been reduced to a catch phrase for racism, and his failed political campaigns have convinced political scientists that Duke has no chance of ever winning elective office again. But even though his political future looks extremely bleak at the moment, Duke is convinced that the sweeping Republican victory in the 1994 elections was a validation of his views. He claims that the success of the party at the polls hinged on the issues that Duke himself had previously run on, including immigration, welfare reform, and the flat tax. He says he feels "flattered" by the GOP adoption of his political agenda: "I think the country's moving in my direction."⁹¹ And what of Duke's future plans? Will he run for political office again? Tyler Bridges

⁸⁷ Tyler Bridges, "Once a Wizard, David Duke Seems to Have Lost Magic Touch," *Houston Chronicle*, November 26, 1992.

⁸⁸ On his radio program, Duke recently (4/13/94) said that South Africa's political direction is wrong: he argues that racial separation along geographic lines is valuable because "everyone deserves to live with his own kind." He went on to predict that racial segregation will soon be necessary in the southern United States because "we need to keep the invading Mexican hordes from taking over our culture."

⁸⁹ Jim Mulvaney, "'Politically Incorrect' Radio: David Duke Takes Message to the Airwaves," *Newsday*, August 2, 1993.

⁹⁰ Tyler Bridges, in personal interview, April 26, 1994.

⁹¹ Charles R. Babcock and Dan Balz, "David Duke Says Republican Sweep Validates His Views," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1995.

has speculated that the controversial politician will “run for governor again [in 1995]....Duke feels that he is meant to become president one day.”⁹² Not surprisingly, Duke’s answer is more subtle: “I think the sentiment of the country will swing my way in the next couple of years. People will look for people like me.”⁹³

It remains to be seen how far politicians can indeed influence the mass media in their efforts to further their political goals. However, it can surely be said that the United States has entered an era in which technological innovation enables politicians to appeal to their constituency much more directly than ever before. Of course, there is a limit to the success of manipulating the press: an examination of David Duke’s political career certainly can attest to the fact that politicians cannot hide behind media-created images forever. But in a political environment inundated with television news programs and radio talk shows, it is necessary to take careful note of candidates’ use of media in attempts to advance their careers.

The development of new—and easily manipulated—technology has certainly enabled political elites to use controlled images to affect the viewing (and voting) public. But if politicians in the public eye like David Duke are allowed to “dominate [the] media...we can expect their manipulation of public opinion to become ever more successful.”⁹⁴ People should be made more aware of overt attempts by politicians to influence what the public sees and hears; voters must seek out and ponder “alternative realities to those derived from mass-mediated politics.”⁹⁵ Clearly, the emergence of political media manipulation warrants greater public attention.

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⁹² Bridges, personal interview, 1994.

⁹³ Bridges 1992. In a recent personal interview (April 13, 1995), Tyler Bridges reported that Duke is “95% sure” that he will commit to entering the next Louisiana gubernatorial election. But for now, “he’s continuing to work on his autobiography.”

⁹⁴ Michael Margolis and Gary A. Mauser, *Manipulating Public Opinion: Essays on Public Opinion as a Dependent Variable*, (Pacific Grove, CA.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1989), 379.

⁹⁵ Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Mediated Political Realities*, (New York: Longman), 1990.

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